DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 717 HE 016 674

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TITLE The National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education: A Model of Educational Research and Development.
PUB DATE [68]
NOTE 8p.; For related documents, see ED 112 473, HE 016 673-685, and HE 016 689. Not available in paper copy due to marginal legibility of original.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Advisory Committees; Clearinghouses; *Coordination; *Early Childhood Education; Educational Cooperation; *Educational History; Educational Research; *Information Networks; Linking Agents; Problem Solving; *Regional Laboratories; *Research and Development Centers; Research Needs
IDENTIFIERS *NIE R and D Centers and Regional Educational Labs

ABSTRACT

The structure and functions of the National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education are discussed. The National Laboratory was designed to assume a leadership role by actually conducting a coordinated research and development (R&D) program and by continuously analyzing the field to identify problem areas and solutions. The National Laboratory was started in 1967 by the U.S. Office of Education with a nucleus of R&D centers, a Coordination Center, and an Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Clearinghouse. The R&D centers were envisioned as part of an integrated program, representing many disciplines and approaches but committed to cooperation. The group of centers would develop into a large network of communications among investigators and between them and practitioners. The National Coordination Center was designated to promote coordination among centers, reduce duplication, and generally raise the quality of R&D. The Steering Committee, composed of center directors and others, is the key instrument for achieving coordination of R&D work within the National Laboratory. The Advisory Board continually reviews the entire program, the quality of the research in individual centers and the efforts of the Coordination Center, in the context of the nationwide educational picture. (SW)

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THE NATIONAL LABORATORY ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

The rapidly growing interest in the education of young children is visible in nearly all sectors of our society. Tremendous social pressures resulting from new legislation, from theoretical advances and new research findings, and from increased attention to the demands of the educationally disadvantaged have created a great need on a nationwide scale. To make rapid inroads on the problems associated with this need requires considerable organization of resources. The National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education has been designed as an organizing effort in this field. It is intended to assume leadership in research and development for the improvement of the education of young children, particularly those from birth through 8 years of age.

The idea is that the ultimate goal—improvement in early childhood education—will be effected more quickly if problems are focused and attacked in a concentrated way and if the efforts of researchers, instructional designers and educational practitioners are coordinated. The two principal thrusts of the National Laboratory program or ways in which it will assume leadership and attempt to advance the field are: (1) actually conducting a coordinated research and development program of the highest quality and (2) continuously analyzing the field in order to dramatize the problems needing most attention and to point out the most promising educational ideas to those who can implement them.

Let us first get acquainted with the structure of the National Laboratory and then turn to the nature of its program and the means by which it carries out those two functions.

Structure

In February of 1967, the U.S. Office of Education launched the National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education with a nucleus

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of research and development centers, a Coordination Center, and an Educational Resources Information Center Clearinghouse.

This National Laboratory comes under the authority of Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 which extended and amended the Cooperative Research Act of 1954. Regional Educational Laboratories and the Research and Development Center Program are related programs which also come under this authority, but our attention here is directed to this new and unique vehicle-the National Laboratory.

R. Louis Bright, the Office of Education's Associate Commissioner for Research, feels that this program is best described as a distributed R and D Center. (See Figure 1). The five current research centers included in this program are located at George Peabody College for Teachers where Dr. Susan Gray

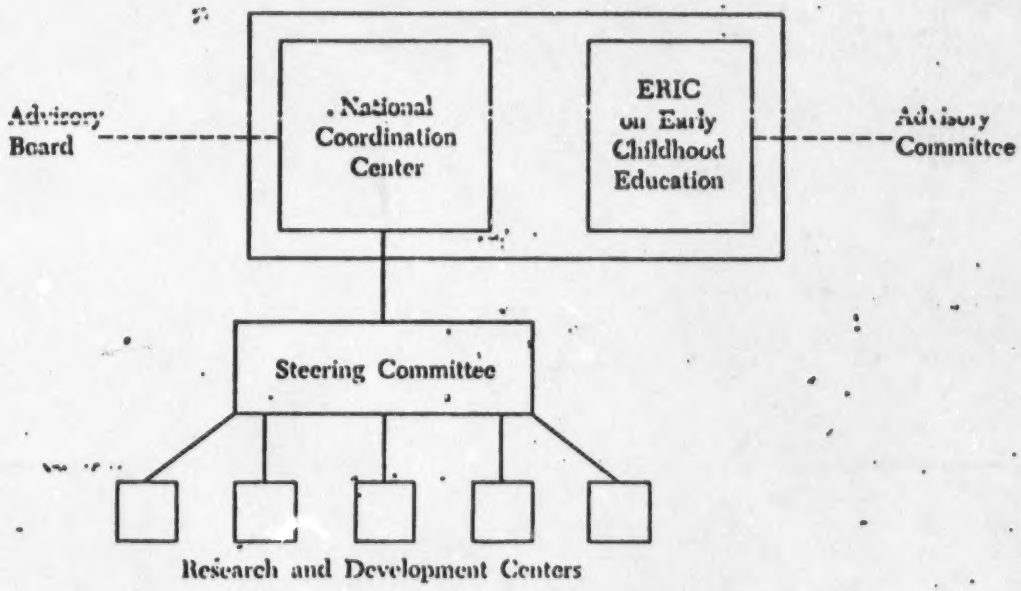

Fig. 1. Organizational chart of the National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education. ERIC relationships and NCC-field relationships are not shown.

directs the Demonstration and Research Center in Early Education; The University of Chicago where Dr. William Henry is director of the Early Education Research Center; Syracuse University where Dr. William Meyer is director of the Research Center in Early Childhood Education; The University of Arizona where Dr. Marie Hughes is director of the Center for Early Childhood Education; Cornell University where Dr. Henry Ricciuti is director of the Early Childhood Education Center.

The directors of each of these centers, together with the director of the Coordination Center and a representative of the Office of Education, compose the Steering Committee for the National Laboratory. These are the individuals who are closest to the operating research programs; they meet regularly with one another to decide on coordinated action.

The National Coordination Center, directed by Dr. J. Wes. Hunt, and the Educational Resources Information Center on Early Childhood Education, directed by Dr. Brian Carss, are located at The University of Illinois in Urbana.

The Coordination Center has an Advisory Board composed of approximately 12 national leaders who have an interest in early childhood. Some are university administrators who advise on organizing a large research and development operation; some are early childhood educators who have an informed perspective on the applications of research and possible implementation of educational practices; some are business or cultural leaders who reflect national needs and trends; some are scholars in the behavioral sciences who can advise on the quality of research and development efforts. This group reviews program and makes recommendations to the staff of the National Coordination Center on broad policy issues. One of their functions of course is to review the proposal being submitted to the U.S. Office of Education requesting continued support for the total effort.

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education also has an advisory committee which advises on quality of material collected and processed and also quality of materials and services provided. Besides furnishing information to researchers and educators in the field at large, the ERIC on Early Childhood Education gives special attention to programs for the disadvantaged. Special materials are prepared for personnel in the Head Start, Follow-Through and Parent and Child Center programs.

Quality Research and Development

The original planners of the National Laboratory envisioned a network of centers comprising a nucleus of high quality educational research and development in early childhood. These centers would form an integrated program, representing many disciplines, approaches and points of view, but committed to cooperation and collaboration. The group of centers would rapidly mature into a vast and very complex network of communications among investigators and between them and practitioners. There would be collaborative research projects among investigators in several centers, student and faculty exchanges, rapid data exchange and many other activities.

The appropriate number of centers to be included in this nucleus would seem to be about 10 or 12. Such seems to be the number which will permit the freest and most constructive communication. It may be that close communication can only be achieved with as many as 6 or 7 centers—after which it becomes unwieldy and breaks down. It would be impossible to imagine anything but one way communication from a Coordination Center to a group of research center directors

if the number of centers were 20 or more. Although various kinds of communication will be achieved among all major efforts in the child development and education field, free exchange and a closely coordinated research and development operation within a single national laboratory model can only be achieved with a limited number of centers.

The general level of funding for individual research centers so far has been between $100,000 and $300,000 per year. It is possible that individual centers—either existing ones or ones to be added in the future—would have a program spending as much as $500,000 per year, but the model advanced is several centers conducting moderate-sized programs in distinction to a smaller number of centers conducting larger operations. In the model proposed, when approximately five million dollars are available for a coordinated research and development operation, it is more valuable to support 10 centers at one-half million dollars each than five centers at a million dollars each.

The limit of $500,000 here refers to the Office of Education funding in each center. Actually there is no limit on the size of individual-centers. The universities themselves already make a 5-10% contribution, and there is every reason to believe that centers will attract other sources of funding for projects related to their present work. The Demonstration and Research Center at Peabody, for example, is funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity as well as the Office of Education. The funds are for different functions, and this center manages a coordinated program of research, development, demonstration and training by using funds from various sources for appropriate jobs.

The Office of Education has encouraged the National Cordination Center to diversify its sources of funding in order to avoid complete dependence on one supporting agency and to be able to launch activities in areas not appropriately supported under the authority of the educational research legislation. Funding by private foundations or Federal programs for training educational personnel, for example, would permit certain training activities that would foster the objectives of the National Laboratory and be exceedingly beneficial to the total program.

The flexible structure of the National Laboratory also permits the addition of an already-existing, high quality center or the building up of a center on an under-developed area depending on the needs of the Laboratory's program. This has its opposite kind of flexibility which makes it possible to discontinue those centers where the work is not of an acceptable quality, is of low priority, or where the direction of a program no longer fits in with that of the National Laboratory as a whole. A major criterion for the addition of a new center to the Laboratory would be the extent to which its program complemented the on-going programs in the other centers. An interdisciplinary balance as well as broad coverage of topics would be desirable.

The agency designated to bring about coordination among the centers, reduce unwitting duplication, stimulate constructive criticism, foster collaboration, and generally raise the quality of research and development is the National Coordination Center. The present director, Dr. J. McV. Hunt, has expressed the feeling that coordination cannot be forced but necessarily comes from communication among individuals. Some of the most effective communication channels already exist due to the structure of the Laboratory. An example of this would be the Steering Committee meetings. However, most of the communication channels are activities arranged by the Coordination Center and by the individual research centers. These

are such things as small task groups, personnel exchanges, conferences, and paper exchanges. For example, one small meeting of investigators working in the area of language development has resulted in a collaborative research project. The design of this study to evaluate differences in methods of teaching grammatical structure is presently being drawn up. Another cooperative activity which emerged from meetings arranged by the Coordination Center is the plan for storing tapes of children's language samples from all those centers which collect them.

Investigators in each of the research centers have expanded opportunities for contact with colleagues in other centers and these increase through specially arranged coordination activities. Findings of Pelz and Andrews in their book, *Scientists in Organizations*, lead us to believe that this feature of increased colleague contact promotes greater research and development productivity.

The Steering Committee-the group of center directors and others-is probably the key instrument for *achieving* coordination of the research and development work within the National Laboratory. The Coordination Center can facilitate activities and the Advisory Board can recommend certain areas and functions, but the implementation of these activities is to a great extent in the hands of the center directors, who compose the Steering Committee.

As a team, working with the Coordination Center director, the Steering Committee discusses and decides on many of the same problems as the Advisory Board and the Coordination Center itself, but it has a unique influence in shaping the overall program. Gaps to be filled and overconcentrations to be dissipated are identified, and then detailed methods by which to remedy faults are discussed and decided. Individual projects and center programs are reviewed in relation to immediate and long-term goals, and criticisms are then carried back to research personnel.

While the Steering Committee does not have the power to say what activities the coordination center must engage in, it is out of the demands and decisions of this group that most of the coordination center's activities come. It is this group which is closest to investigators in early childhood education and which can point out those individuals the Coordination Center should bring in contact with others, which investigator should be encouraged to expand their activities and which, encouraged to cut down on size or adjust the focus of their work to supplement the overall program.

Naturally, the Cordination Center, not the Steering Committee, has the final say about which center's support through the National Laboratory program will grow and which will not. The Steering Committee would otherwise be in a position of conflict of intest, since a center director would not be inclined to decrease his support through the Laboratory program in order to accommodate the expansion of another group.

The director of the Coordination Center leads the Steering Committee, arranges for those activities which are most needed and feasible, modifies the demands from the centers and the field according to counsel from his Advisory Board, and carries responsibility for presenting the research and development program to the Office of Education.

National Impact

A high quality research and development program will not be promoted by cooperation merely among the centers within the program. It requires that investigators be in touch with other investigators wherever they may be. It is the purpose of the National Laboratory not just to build up a limited, high quality research and development pro-

gram, but to make the work in the whole field progress at a higher level in order to improve early childhood education.

Influencing the education of young children is not a remote goal. The National Laboratory is designed to foster communication not only among researchers and developers of innovative practices but also to stimulate two-way communication with the field of education. The Coordination Center provides services to particular target populations, disseminates needed information to educational change agents and identifies interesting educational programs in the field at large. It is by serving as a focal point for advances in early childhood education that the Laboratory will make an impact on education nationally.

The group that may be most influential in guiding the Coordination Center to be outward-looking in fostering communication among all research and development people and among these people and educational practitioners, is the Advisory Board. Because of their broad representation and because they are not so close to the day to day operation of the program, they are less sensitive to individual demands and more sensitive to the general welfare. They are qualified to make judgments about priorities for the early childhood laboratory which will insure national impact.

The Advisory Board continually reviews the entire program package, the quality of the research in individual centers and the efforts of the Coordination Center, in the context of the nationwide educational picture. They then make recommendations about priorities.

The Coordination Center exercises tremendous flexibility in fostering the contacts among the research centers and between them and the educators and research people in the field. The Coordination Center arranges conferences of investigators inside and outside the Laboratory proper, which can result (as some already have) in collaborative efforts, seeks people in the field or in a Regional Educational Laboratory, for example, who are interested in developing educational materials based on some particular research findings, or seeks an evaluation expert to design a rigorous test of some educational practices. A conference on Ways to Foster Development in Infancy, held in November 1967, illustrates a way in which the Coordination Center fulfills several of the functions of the Laboratory Program at once. Basic research interests and problems were shared, since investigators, both from the research centers and many other programs, reported briefly on their work in infant development. The Parent and Child Center program was benefitted since planners of this OEO program for families with children under three attended and an attempt was made to collate all the findings and devices which were ready for practical implementation. Government representatives from the Children's Bureau, the National Institute of Mental Health, the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Office of Education, were involved in the meeting and became better acquainted, along with the non-government participants with programs of related agencies. Papers summarizing various aspects of the conference will be prepared by the Coordination Center. These could be aimed at specific populations, e.g. people running day-care facilities (including Parent and Child Centers), investigators interested in research on development during infancy, educators of teachers and early childhood specialists.

This conference represents one of the many kinds of activities carried out by the Coordination Center in response to Advisory Board recommendations, Steering Committee plans, demands from the field at large, or

self-initiated activities. Examples of other coordinating functions within the National Laboratory and services to the field which will reveal the value of this model for making a national impact are: the planned publications which analyze the objectives and important factors in various pre-school instructional programs, the workshop for teachers of disadvantaged primary-grade children, especially Follow-Through personnel, now being held at the University of Arizona Center by Dr. Marie Hughes, the ERIC Newsletter to educational researchers and an ERIC Newsletter to personnel in Head Start and other preschool educators, the inter-center visits by the Coordination and research center staff, symposia to be planned and held at professional meetings, and the continuation of small task groups of investigators working on the same problem areas.

The National Laboratory program is the kind of flexible model which can be expected to keep up with the times and maintain its position of leadership in the field of early childhood education.

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